

Chesterfield fighting for the right to be the ultimate community club

5/14



David
Conn

INSIDE FOOTBALL



Chesterfield fans relish escaping relegation. 'I probably shouldn't have been on the pitch jumping 10 feet in the air,' McFarland said *Bernard Jones*

THERE IS NOT too much in football which Roy McFarland has not seen in a commanding playing career spanning 28 England caps and two League Championships with Derby, then 23 grinding years in management at Bradford, Derby, Bolton, Cambridge and the ultimately successful battle to keep Torquay in the Football League in 2002. Last Saturday, however, was up there with the most extreme emotional moments of his footballing life. His current club, Chesterfield, began the day third from bottom and two points from safety, and if they were to beat off relegation from the Second Division, they not only had to win their home game against Luton, but Rushden & Diamonds and Grimsby – managed by the Spireites' former captain and manager Nicky Law – both had to lose.

At half-time, Chesterfield were still at 0-0 in a surprisingly free-flowing game, but Grimsby were 1-0 up. McFarland told me he was "strangely calm"; probably, he thinks, because he knew his side were doing all they could. When the news came through that Tranmere had scored twice and Grimsby were losing, the 6,300 crowd at Saltergate roared Chesterfield on with immense passion, keeping up the volume throughout the second half until the striker Glynn Hurst popped up in the Luton penalty area in the 88th minute to hop Chesterfield somehow above both Rushden and Grimsby and achieve the season's latest, greatest, escape. McFarland suddenly found himself, along with a stream of fans from the home end, pouring on to the pitch with relief and delight. "I probably shouldn't have been on there jumping 10 feet in the air," he said, "but it was a good feeling."

Grown men cried, the players beamed, the town drank itself silly, and for Chesterfield, there was more reason for such joy than the thrilling details of their unfeasible footballing leapfrog. This is a historic club, formed in 1866, the League's fourth oldest, which went into administration almost three years ago following a turbulent few months under the former chairman Darren Brown, who, after a long investigation by the Serious Fraud Office, will on 4 October stand trial at Derby Crown Court

charged with 13 counts of theft and six other counts of fraud.

Back in May 2001, the Chesterfield Football Supporters Society, just 16 days after they were formed as one of the new model trusts helped by the Government's initiative Supporters Direct, took over 78 per cent of the club, and since then the club's course has been far from easy. Collecting 3,000 members out of an average crowd of 4,500 demonstrated booming commitment from fans, who collectively raised £300,000 for the club. With the support of the local council, which loaned £200,000 during administration, Chesterfield made it to a Company Voluntary Arrangement settlement agreeing to pay creditors three lots of £183,000 in September 2002, 2003 and this year.

Faced with that, and losses the club was continuing to make, CFSS struggled to keep the club above water – and then, in April 2002, Carlton and Granada pulled ITV Digital. "We were all fundraised out," said Phil Tooley, then a CFSS director and now its chairman. The society asked local businessmen Barrie Hubbard, Mike Warner and the accountant Alan Walters to help financially, and a supporter, Jason Elliott, also chipped in with significant money. They agreed that while the fans would retain ownership of the club, the main funders would be directors responsible for its day-to-day running. CFSS, whose directors are all elected annually, nominated two of their number on to the club's board.

The arrangement was fraught at first. "It was disappointing to have to hand that kind of control over after all the efforts the supporters had made," Tooley said. "But for me, it was a bad Saturday night, then on Sunday I woke up determined to help my club again."

The initial culture clashes have gradually resolved themselves into a relationship between fans and financiers which has, particularly this season, begun to work much more harmoniously. The faultline now is far more positive, between a

'You feel elated to be involved, although it's draining. But it's important now to turn this club round from a struggling business into something which can move forward'

board fixated on every financial creak in the drive to balance the books, and a supporters' society ever more ambitious to transform the club into a community institution for the town.

Excited by the more progressive ideas which, even in these barmy financial times, are painstakingly gaining credence in football, CFSS launched a strategy to engage fully with the community: The Club's the Hub. Since then, Tooley, Howard Borrell, CFSS's community liaison officer, and John Croot, one of the CFSS directors on the club's board, have made links with more than 20 local organisations including the police, primary care trusts and Chesterfield College, and

begun to develop projects through which the club can help to promote education, health, broad "social inclusion" for a range of underprivileged people and other community aspirations. The society's feasibility study stated as its aim the desire to become "a true social enterprise", inclusive of all sections of the community, which will make Chesterfield "a beacon for the role of a professional sports club". This is not the sort of talk much heard at Saltergate in the previous 120 years or so.

The move to a new, 10,000 capacity, £7m stadium, for which a planning application is due to go in next month, will, they hope, make a grand statement of purpose for the club and its role in the town, as well as providing room for corporate entertainment and other ways of making money which their old, much loved, weary ground cannot currently provide.

Walters, the accountant-supporter who delved into the numbers when the club was in administration and has since become its finance director, while he shares the long-term community vision, emphasises the first priority of cutting every available cost and finally getting the club to break even. They lost

£480,000 the first year after administration, £200,000 last year and are expecting to lose the same amount again this time. The loans from Hubbard, Warner, Elliott and Walters are around £700,000 and they are resolved not to increase them.

"Saturday was wonderful," Walters said. "That's when you feel elated to be involved, although it was totally draining. But it's very important now to turn this club round from a struggling business into something which can move forward."

Walters reckons that staying up will make the club £250,000 more, in a division which now includes Sheffield Wednesday, Barnsley, Hull and several other large local rivals. Two new directors have joined the board, bringing investment with them: "We're all so battle-scarred now," Walters said, "it'll be good to have people who are relatively fresh."

The local council provided a loan of £183,000 for last year's CVA payment and is expected to agree to lend the same amount again to pay this year's, taking the authority's total contribution to £566,000, made in recognition, the council said, of the club's importance to the town.

The purse strings are still tight; McFarland's reward for all this excitement is a cut of £100,000 from this season's £750,000 budget for players' wages. "I'm used to it," he said, gamely. "Things were very difficult at Cambridge and Torquay, even at Bradford back when I

started in 1981, although I've perhaps never experienced a situation as tight as this." He has made offers to several of the 14 players whose contracts are up now, and is waiting hopefully for the reaction of his three most highly rated players, the former Nottingham Forest centre-half Steve Blatherwick, the skilful midfielder Chris Brandon, and Glynn Hurst, to the terms of their proposed renewals.

As a football man seasoned in management's short-term insecurities, McFarland might be expected to be a little detached from the parochial passions which spilled over at Saltergate last Saturday, but he said he has begun to feel for the soul of the club: "I knew a little of what had happened when I took the job, but every day I talk to people and understand how difficult it has been and how much it has meant to them to save the club. It also means they want to move on as far as possible and leave all that behind."

In the week in which the Football League announced that this season's attendances broke all records since 1964, Tooley said he was most moved by the size and passion of Saturday's crowd. "The Chesterfield experience shows how central football clubs are to their towns," he said. "We're determined to become a vital sporting and social institution, which everybody can be proud of. As a fan, last Saturday was the greatest I've experienced at Saltergate in the 30 years I've been a Chesterfield supporter." davidconn@independent.co.uk